

Tilburg University

Joint Statement on the Sinai crisis of Human Trafficking and Torture

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Joint Statement on the Sinai Crisis of Human Trafficking and Torture

10 October 2013

A delegation from African Church leaders representing All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC), Tilburg University and Europe External Policy Advisors (EEPA), together with the Progressive Nationalist Baptist Convention in USA and Release Eritrea Civil Society Organization in United Kingdom, visited Tel Aviv from the 25th till the 30th of August 2013. We were hosted by the Hotline for Migrant Workers in Tel Aviv and received testimonies from Physicians for Human Rights, Amnesty International and the community providing assistance to the survivors of human trafficking in the Sinai.

The mission of the delegation was to meet with survivors of human trafficking and torture in the Sinai in order to gain understanding of the situation these survivors went through and now live in. Most predominantly these survivors come from Eritrea, whilst a small group come from Darfur and Ethiopia. At present it is estimated that there are tens of thousands of Sinai trafficking survivors, in Israel and Egypt, Europe and other countries.

The delegation is shocked by what it learnt regarding the horrific inhumane experiences of the survivors it has talked to. The delegation listened to the testimonies of survivors, and understood that people are being kidnapped from the Eritrea-Sudan border region, the Ethiopia-Sudan border region and UNHCR refugee camps in Sudan, were sold to traffickers, and brought to Sinai. In Sinai the hostages are subject to cruel and sadistic torture and many lose their life. The ransoms asked are very high. Many lose their lives even after ransoms have been paid.

The delegation heard of the fence that has been built on the Egypt-Israel border, stopping the free passage of Sinai survivors. In fact, the Israeli Immigration Authority states that only 84 new asylum seekers entered Israel since the beginning of 2013. The delegation also learned that currently 200 Sinai survivors are imprisoned in Israeli detention centres where they are subjected to cruel and unjust prison treatment, whilst they are denied access to legal recourse according to Israeli law and treatment to deal with the traumatic experiences they have lived in the Sinai where they have been subject to extreme circumstances of torture and threats of their live. Children are also held in detention In Israel.

The delegation looked into the support provided in Israel, where many of the survivors of Sinai have sought refuge, but do not enjoy any legal recognition. We learnt that the survivors receive undignified treatment or no treatment at all which is clearly in contravention of international standards. Considering the physical and psychological torture experienced by the Sinai survivors, the delegation is shocked that the survivors are receiving extremely inadequate support and lack of legal recognition from the government of Israel. The delegation found that the inhumane treatment of the survivors in Israel compounds the physical, psychological and emotional trauma already inflicted on them.

The delegation is shocked to hear of the sexual violence and rape inflicted on the hostages in Sinai, resulting in unwanted pregnancies. It expresses its concern over the lack of access to desperately needed gynaecological services in and outside the prisons in Israel where the Sinai survivors are held. The delegation was also horrified with the reports of children and infants included in sadistic torture practices in Sinai. The injustice of all this keeps the Sinai survivors in Israel and elsewhere in a vicious circle of despair, resulting in suicides and mental breakdown, as they lose hope of any possibility of amelioration of their especially desperate situation. There is also a generation of (stateless) children growing up in Israel, in and outside prisons, reached after having been held under the cruelest circumstances in Sinai, without any future prospect.

From the testimonies of several torture survivors, the delegation is also aware that in other transit and destination countries equal serious challenges are encountered by Sinai survivors.

The delegation noted with appreciation the efforts of Eritrean community and local Israeli led organisations such as the Hotline for Migrant Workers, Physicians for Human Rights Israel (PHR-Israel), Amnesty International, Aid Organization for Refugees and Asylum Seekers (ASSAF), African Refugees Development Centre (ARDC) in Tel Aviv, in responding to the diverse needs of the survivors. The delegation commends the local initiatives of the survivors to provide mutual support and the solidarity and sharing amongst themselves. The delegation commends all support efforts provided in terms of shelters and safe-houses, but is concerned that most of the survivors are homeless.

In the absence of adequate support facilities, the delegation is concerned with the lack of access to livelihood and work and means to sustain lives, even with the most basic elementary necessities, due to the lack of status of refugees in Israel, and expresses its indignation of the vicious circle of injustice, the lack of support and the absence of any recognition of their human rights. The delegation is concerned that children and infants are imprisoned in Israel under the new so-called 'infiltrators law' (this has in the mean time been repealed by the Supreme Court of Israel). The labelling of Sinai victims and refugees as 'infiltrators' would appear as a denial of their situation as torture survivors.

Having witnessed and heard heartbreaking testimonies, we strongly affirm the need to uphold peace, justice and human dignity. We recognise our common responsibility for the welfare of humanity and the well-being of each and every human being. We need to act to find support for the survivors who have been released. We must do everything possible and not spare any efforts to stop these inhumane, cruel and sadistic acts of torture and trafficking in Sinai. It is our responsibility to engage in ending this crisis. It is also our responsibility to sensitize the communities about this.

The delegation calls :

- on the international community to acknowledge this ongoing tragedy and to recognise article 1 of the Refugee Convention so that Sinai survivors receive protection on that basis.
- On the Egyptian Authorities to act quickly in order to free the refugees held hostage in the Sinai, to prosecute the smugglers and those that assist them, to bring an immediate

end to the torture camps and the network of human trafficking, and to provide care for the torture survivors.

- on all countries to stop deportation of Sinai survivors and to stop deportations of any refugees to Eritrea, given the uncertainty and fear of persecution the deportees may face in their home country and to respect the principle of non-refoulement.
- on the UN High Commissioner for Refugees to urgently address the needs of survivors of the Sinai crisis, using all available means and most particularly to ensure the protection of refugees in the UN refugee camps which are under his responsibility.
- on the African Union to use all its mechanisms to prevent human trafficking, abduction from refugee camps and to ensure safe movement of African people within and across borders according to their aspirations.
- on the relevant regional groups, including IGAD and the Arab League, to address the Sinai crisis.
- on faith-based organisations in Israel to continue and expand efforts to affirm the dignity of the strangers in the land of Israel and provide pastoral care and to contribute to reconciliation among the affected communities.
- On Israel to treat Sinai survivors in accordance with international law and provide protection and treatment in full respect of the international refugee Convention.
- on the EU to use its influence to find appropriate mechanisms to support the Sinai survivors and to provide asylum to Sinai survivors and to improve reception of refugees in general in accordance with international law.
- on Egypt, Israel, Libya, Sudan and Yemen to use their respective influence to find appropriate mechanisms to support the Sinai survivors and to provide asylum to Sinai survivors and to improve reception of refugees in general in accordance with international law.

In recognition of the historical experiences of exclusion, torture and marginalisation of the Jewish people, we appeal to the Israeli government to be more humane in responding to the needs of the Sinai trafficking survivors within its borders.

We commit ourselves to step up the efforts of our respective institutions, deepen our knowledge and understanding of the crisis and its causes and to collaborate with others to stop this crisis of human trafficking, torture and killing, to improve the safe movements of people across borders, to protect refugees and to support the Sinai survivors in full respect of human dignity.